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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further action and initiatives: women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building

Statement submitted by the Friends World Committee for Consultation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The international community is beginning to acknowledge that girls participate in armed groups. For the past three years, the Quaker United Nations Office of the Friends World Committee for Consultation has been engaged in a study of the lives of these girls, focusing on their demobilization and re-integration needs. In the study, entitled "Voices of Girl Child Soldiers", girls in Angola, Colombia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka told their stories. This offered an initial view into an experience that has not been widely recognized, documented or understood.

In addition to research on Girl Child Soldiers, the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) has played a leadership role on the issue of small arms and light weapons. Our small arms work focuses on the terrible impact these weapons have on human beings and the demand-side factors that lead individuals to seek out and use small arms.

Given the role that small arms play in the lives of girl child soldiers, it is useful to consider how these two areas of work intersect. QUNO believes that this is an important and heretofore unexplored linkage, one that deserves attention. As Security Council resolution 1325 has shown us, women and girls, like men and boys, are profoundly impacted by the experience of violent conflict and small arms. Like men and boys, girls face certain situations that lead them to take up arms, contributing to the tragic experience of gun violence among combatants and civilians alike. A more holistic understanding of the root causes that produce girl child soldiers, and put small arms in their hands, will help us more effectively address their needs in both pre conflict and post conflict situations. Our final goal is to build a durable peace that includes all members of the community.

The stories collected in the study have begun to teach us much about how girls come to serve in armed groups, what their life is like as a member of these groups, and the challenges they face looking towards the future.

Whether girls found themselves abducted, or joined up voluntarily, certain factors made them more likely to become members of armed groups. For the girls in this study, these factors were often found in the very places that girls called home. Girls were particularly vulnerable living close to a zone of conflict, being left at home without the protection of an adult or separated from their family. Likewise, living in poverty and with real anxiety about essential survival needs, meant they were more likely to join a movement or be abducted. Finally, girls were not willing to remain at home and live with their family when a family member was exploiting them sexually or treating them violently.

Once they became part of an armed group, the experience had a profound effect their view of the future. For those who volunteered, the experience often produced deep regret, raising doubts about their own decision. In all four countries, girls saw education or vocational training as fundamental to their own process of reintegration. Girls expressed that they were not searching for ways to retaliate against those who had mistreated them, or the enemy who had killed their comrades. Instead they sought atonement for their own acts and wanted the fighting to stop and the killing to be over.

The girls interviewed also spoke about their experience with small arms. Their use of guns differed: some girls were given guns, others were not; some of the girls had periods of training, up to 12 weeks, others were handed a weapon with no training; girls talked about firing and carrying AK47s, M16s, T56s, 81 Rifles, pistols; they learned to disassemble, clean, reassemble and shoot. The girls' stories tell us of the role that small arms played in their lives as soldiers. A demand side approach can help us understand how these weapons often met the needs of girl child soldiers providing them with things they were otherwise lacking. These needs often included identity, security, power and respect.

Some girls spoke of the sense of identity that came from carrying a gun and being identified as a "fighter". In one country, girls were given wooden guns first — they carried them and were admonished to "become one with the gun"; when the officers in this particular armed group felt the girls were comfortable with the gun, they then provided real guns. One young woman said, "The day I got the rifle, I was thrilled and happy". Another young woman said, "You have to wait till you are ready to get a real rifle…the moment they realize you are not scared and you are keen to handle a rifle you are given one. I never got one; I was never a fighter fit to go to war, I did not want to fight; inside my mind I knew I was not made for fighting a war." In another armed group, girls told of the excitement and pride of being chosen to carry "a special gun", which occurred after a period of training. These quotes illustrate how small arms brought girls a sense of identity and status as a fighter.

Small arms also provided the girls with security that was otherwise absent in the ruthlessness of violent conflict. One young woman said, "After three weeks they let me hold a gun, but I was so afraid that it might fire accidentally, then I might get hit and die…so they asked me, what's more important, that I die or I kill… in case the enemy is already there and there's no way to escape, then we have to use the gun." The threat of the enemy was not the only source of insecurity for girls. Being armed also protected them from others in their own armed group. One of the most revealing statements relating to the

girls' experience of insecurity was from a young woman in the Philippines said, "I felt very safe; I had no fear…if someone tried to abuse me, both of us had guns".

Finally, those interviewed observed that a gun brought them power and respect. One girl said, "It is good to have guns just in case, because out there in the countryside if you don't have a gun no one takes any notice of you. The civilians now know that we have to carry guns or something so that people respect you". Another girl said, "In the Movement I felt a sense of power. I was carrying a high-powered rifle".

These statements regarding identity, security, power and respect tell us much about what was missing from the girls' lives and indicate some of the underlying root causes that lead them to take up small arms. While these weapons helped to meet the needs of some, many also spoke of the fear and intense guilt that using these weapons produced. All of the girls (except those in the Philippines) were in fear of their lives, often from both their own side as well as the other. Death could come in many forms, but the most frequent was in the form of a bullet. Girls experienced fear for their own lives and safety, but were also afraid to take the lives of others. One said, "The most terrible thing they ordered me to do was to kill. They ordered me to, but I only injured someone, I told them I didn't want to." Two girls had differing feelings about pulling the trigger, one was afraid that if she shot someone would shoot her; the others said that you must shoot or be shot.

A number of women talked of having witnessed the shooting of, or having pulled the trigger on civilians, and the intense guilt this produced. The woman who reported being "thrilled and happy" to receive her rifle later told of an attack on a village where innocent people were killed. She said, "I didn't want to shoot or kill innocent people. I was scolded as though I was a traitor…they [the armed group] rushed in and killed the couple and the baby. I was so sad, I couldn't save them. This incident will not go away from my memory."

Upon leaving the armed group, all the girls were made to surrender their weapons. The girls in this study spoke very little about guns after capture or surrender, but did talk a great deal about their feelings of having been involved in killing. Many made deals with God, questioned their faith, or hoped that they would not be damned. Others had ongoing flashbacks of scenes of battle or killings. None of the girls wanted to go back to combat, killing or raids. The girls interviewed felt that children under 18 should be treated as children, that both families and governments should protect them and provide for them so that they would never go to fight.

In conclusion, we need to look at what the voices of these girls have told us and how they inform our action for the future. We have learned that girls serve as combatants in armed groups and that small arms play a role in that experience. Guns may offer a source of identity, they provide security, power and respect to these individuals who find themselves in extraordinarily vulnerable situations. Small arms also bring fear into the lives of girl child soldiers and the use of these weapons can leave them struggling under the burden of guilt and uncertainty about the future. Ultimately, any vestiges of childhood are stripped from them once a weapon is placed in their hands.

We are now teaching our daughters, as we have taught our sons, to handle small arms. This certainly is not progress or a form of gender equality that we want to promote. Let us find other ways to meet the needs facing these girls. Instead of arming girls for war and protection, let us undertake disarmament of men and women, boys and girls. Let us also address the vulnerabilities that girls face — ensure they are protected in the home, support families to meet their basic needs.

This study has given us just an initial glimpse into the lives of girl child soldiers, but we need to learn more. With greater understanding we will be able to create effective, culturally-appropriate demobilization and reintegration programs. Further research will also help us understand the factors that lead girls to take up arms. With this understanding, we can begin to work with girls and their families to address these factors and bring about change. A better understanding is essential if we are to build a durable and inclusive peace for all.